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ABSTRACT

To mimic as closely as possible successful classroom procedures, NCTE convention speakers should be assigned topics one hour before their sessions, with only the rhetorical form specified. The audience should shout evaluative comments during presentation and the recorder should interrupt at each spelling and punctuation error. A final grade should be forwarded to the speaker's employers. The chief absurdity of this format lies in the fact that in the world outside the classroom writers do not write under such conditions. The question arises whether the pressures and anxieties teachers impose upon student writers in the classroom are unproductive. Many children bring a spirit of language experimentation to school that is gradually changed to anxiety and error avoidance. Teachers can reduce anxiety by lessening the tyranny of grades and presenting enthusiasm for writing. Assignments should be realistic and pertinent to students' future lives. Free writing exercises and the opportunity to revise papers will produce papers of improved quality. Modelling classroom writing procedures on the practices teachers themselves engage in can create conditions for progress in students' development as writers. (HTH)

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REDUCING ANXIETY IN WRITING INSTRUCTION

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Perhaps like me you are surprised that in the format of a convention of English teachers like this, we make so little use of the strategies and procedures we apply daily in our own instruction. It is as if we were ignoring the accumulated wisdom of our profession. As an experiment, I would like to propose that next year's NCTE convention restructure its format to mimic as closely as possible the actual classroom conditions which have proved so beneficial for generations of our students.

Surely the procedures at this year's convention would never do in our classes: would-be speakers were allowed to propose papers on nearly any subjects that interested us. We were given months to prepare our papers at our leisure, with no safeguards against plagiarism or collaboration. What assurance do you have that colleagues didn't help me edit this paper? That my wife didn't proofread it? Sadly, you have none.

For next year, here is what I propose: speakers will not choose their own topics nor even know them in advance. At the convention, one hour before their sessions are to begin, speakers will report to a room, empty save for a few desks and chairs, where their chairpersons will assign them the topics for their presentations. These will be general, with only the rhetorical form specified: "Prepare a comparison-contrast paper," a speaker might be told, or perhaps: "Write a descriptive essay, using lively and colorful verbs."

The range of topics at the convention will be increased, since with greater attention paid to form than content, there will be little need to restrict papers to subjects of professional relevance. Certain chairs, however, not wishing to give some speakers the unfair advantage of writing on themes that

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interest them, might also choose to assign specific topics, such as: "Write a thesis-and-support paper beginning with the topic sentence, 'Many of today's high school graduates are functional illiterates'."

Speakers will have an hour to prepare their papers. Notes will not, of course, be allowed, nor will speakers be permitted to consult prepared materials other than a dictionary and a handbook. Editorial advice from colleagues would certainly be proscribed as a form of cheating.

We would also wish to overcome another flaw of our present format, the lack of motivation and evaluative response the convention provides. Read a paper now and what do you get? Some polite applause and a recorder's report which nobody reads. What penalties are provided to deter us from folly and error? I'm afraid very few indeed. What we need is exactly the kind of response that our students find so instructive and encouraging. The papers we deliver need an equivalent of the marking we bestow upon the themes submitted in our classes.

For one thing, we could encourage audience participation in the evaluation process, so that speakers' infelicities could be greeted by lusty shouts of "AWK" and "Dangling." Perhaps the chairperson could stand beside the speakers, monitoring their texts and interrupting to report each error of spelling or punctuation. After the third such offense, a speaker would not be permitted to continue. Finally, the recorder would assign each completed paper a letter grade, along with a commentary on its deficiencies of form.

As they do with our students, these grades should prove especially useful. Speakers would be motivated to perform at their best or, should they fail, adequately punished. To guarantee the efficacy of the motivation, the conference could forward a transcript of the speakers' grades to their employers for use in

determining promotions and merit raises. Surely with such motivation, such pressures to perform, the quality of the papers at next year's conference would be enhanced.

Alas, I am afraid we are all convinced otherwise. Under such a format, this conference would degenerate into an absurd exercise--a ceremony in which attention were paid not to what was being said, not to ideas which teachers sought to share, but to superficial textual details and formalities. Speakers, under intense pressures to perform, would do worse than ever.

The chief absurdity of this proposal lies in the artificiality of its format. In the real world--at least outside of classrooms--writers simply do not write under such conditions, nor do readers respond in such a way. Writers who write well write because they have a meaning to express; readers read in order to receive it. Even were speakers capable of preparing presentable and intelligent papers under such severe time constraints, other factors would conspire to insure their inferior success. For one thing, the format would subject them to such stress, would so increase the anxieties they faced, as practically to guarantee their distraction from their subject. Writers need to concentrate their faculties as they compose. For most writers, the double anxieties of an imminent deadline and of the penalties attendant upon their failure to perform would crack if not shatter their concentration. Of course we would find no benefit in making this conference an ordeal for speakers, not to mention an empty ritual for the audience. But the question arises whether the pressures and anxieties we impose daily upon student writers in our classes are unproductive, or even destructive, in any similar way.

Anxiety is not the writer's friend. Students can learn better, teachers

can teach better, in a class where anxieties are minimized. We need to create conditions under which writers can best develop their skills. As much as possible these conditions should simulate the writing conditions of the real world. As much as possible they should encourage the positive and direct motivation to learn which comes from a desire to write well, rather than the indirect motivation of a desired grade or the negative motivation of avoiding failure. Of these, the last, the negative motivation caused by fear and characterized by anxiety, is the least effective in helping students progress.

Using anxiety as a form of motivation neither helps students develop nor prepares them for real-world writing. That is not to say there are no pressures on real writers, nor even that all pressures are harmful. A distinction needs to be made between anxiety, a stressful apprehension concerning the consequences of failure, and discipline, constraints accepted as reasonable and under which writers not only survive but prevail. In their professional lives, authors and business persons write both for deadlines and for the approval of editors and superiors. Many of us thrive under the discipline which a deadline imposes and are stimulated to our best efforts when we write for public approbation. Our students too find clearly defined deadlines and guidelines comforting and even encouraging, and we find they do well when they have a desire to please their readers. By teaching discipline to student writers, we not only help them succeed but we prepare them for the future as well.

But the differences between experienced adult writers and inexperienced students are crucial ones. Skilled writers have confidence in their ability to succeed; most of our students do not. Situations which cause an accomplished writer no anxiety can cause great stress for the novice. When a student recognizes pressures upon her to perform and doubts her ability to do so, the

anxieties which result guarantee her failure. Not only will the student be unable to write well, but she will compensate, often by denying the value of succeeding. Victims of writing-anxiety will come either to hate writing or to profess indifference to it. It is an indictment of our writing instruction that it often compounds the anxieties which lead to failure.

From the earliest grades on, students are likely to face anxieties connected with writing. Until they enter school, most children have only positive, relatively stress-free experiences with language-learning. As preschoolers, they speak because they want to communicate or to imitate their parents; they develop their skills, the more rapidly as they are praised for doing so and as the creative use of language is made a game in which they feel joy. They face neither urgency to perform nor penalties for failure. Their utterances are not graded, nor are their errors labelled and censured. On the contrary, errors among children are expected as they experiment constantly with language, adjusting their mental grammars through trial and error as they discover the rules of the language spoken around them.

Children bring this spirit of experimentation with them to school, and it is a precious gift which teachers are obligated to nurture. Children expect writing to be as much a form of real communication as is speaking. They expect no barriers between themselves and their writing, no isolation of form from content. They expect that learning to write will be as gamelike and rewarding as learning to talk. They expect to succeed at it.

Unfortunately, something happens to change these expectations in the years between their starting school and their presenting themselves to us in high school and college composition classes. Time and again we find their expectations are now very different. Recreating motivation becomes a principal task for us as is rebuilding confidence and reestablishing a sense of joy in language play.

Many students have become wary of experimenting, fearful of trial because they are fearful of error. Many of them believe they are naturally unskilled and expect to fail at secondary and college writing.

One of the oddest tasks that face us is to restore a sense of writing's purpose. It is surprisingly difficult to convince many freshmen that in writing they are saying something they really mean--that the writer is making statements he intends, communicating ideas he believes, expressing sentiments he feels. Many students no longer know that writing is for real and that in writing a paper for a teacher they are engaged in an act of communcation.

What has happened to these students along the way? Where have they acquired these strange notions and changed expectations? The answer is that they learned them in school. Children become quickly acquainted with the concept of error, and much of their instruction is directed toward error-avoidance.

Betty, a fourth grader, writes to her teacher about her cat JoJo, which got stranded in a treetop until rescued by firemen. The paper gets returned to Betty, its spelling and punctuation errors marked in red, her story greeted with the return communication that the paper is unsatisfactory because of its comma splices and its failure to observe straight margins. The teacher writes nothing about JoJo. Betty may learn about commas and margins from this experience; but another lesson about writing makes an even bigger impression: saying something real counts for little; errors count for a lot. It is best to pick a topic the teacher will like; it is even more important to play it safe in the way you write it.

The experience for Betty of writing a paper which will be collected, judged and graded is a new and not very pleasant one. She knows she is very likely to commit errors, and she knows they will be held against her. Her strategy

for success is to temporize: when in doubt about the spelling of a new word, use a simpler, familiar one. Simple sentences are safer than complex ones. The conditions under which Betty as a child learned to speak have been compromised. Experimentation with language through trial and error is no longer a game, no longer even rewarding.

One goal which we set for our students, in grade school through college, is to develop their linguistic sophistication, to expand their stylistic repertoires, to increase their syntactic fluency. We want children, for example, to conjoin sentences; we want teenagers to command free modifiers such as participles and absolutes. As with all language learning, experimentation is the medium of progress; a sense of excitement is its stimulus; freedom to fail is its insurance. Penalties for error inhibit experiment, extinguish excitement, kill any sense of freedom.

Students will not explore new territory when they see only penalties for doing so. In his book Freedom to Learn, psychologist Carl Rogers points to external threat as a barrier to learning. Rogers writes, for example, that when a poor reader is forced to read aloud in front of a group, "the internal panic takes over and the words on the page become less intelligible symbols than they were when he was sitting at his seat before he was called upon" (p. 161).

Lessening stress is essential if our primary task as writing teachers is to teach writing--and not, say, to evaluate writers or to separate the already skilled writers from the unskilled. Our responsibility is to help whatever students present themselves to us to become the best writers they can be. To do so we need to create conditions in our classrooms optimal for learning. A requisite for these conditions is the reduction of anxieties which hinder students' progress.

Not all anxieties, it is true, are within the teacher's power to reduce. Most institutions require that grades be assigned in writing classes, and many students feel their futures jeopardized if they fail to achieve high grades. Although these pressures are institutionalized, they are often compounded by our classroom practices, and I believe the problem of anxiety is not nearly so inherent in composition instruction as we may have assumed.

There is much we can do to lessen the tyranny of grades. For one thing, we can stop relying on them to motivate students. By our attitude alone we can stimulate a far superior motivation, reduce anxiety and establish a climate favorable for learning. Our enthusiasm for writing and for teaching writing can inspire enthusiasm in return from our students. We can demonstrate to them that we are their allies in learning, that our goal is to help them gain competence, not to censure incompetence. We can show students that we want to help them write well and--equally important--that we believe them capable of becoming good writers. A teacher with such an attitude will teach students who find their writing course valuable to them for its own sake, not just for the external motivation of grades.

Equally important in creating this response is our presentation of writing itself. The writing we do in our classes will seem worthwhile to students insofar as it appears realistic and pertinent to their future lives. We must teach real writing, the practices real writers engage in, the varieties of writing real writers address. Even to talk openly about the problems we ourselves face as we write, the struggles we undergo as we compose, may come as a revelation to students who have been taught models of composing which they have never been able to duplicate in their actual practice. (I wonder if we ourselves often write from the detailed outlines we preach to our students. Do we fail to tell them that

writing is an act of discovery, that new ideas and directions constantly emerge as we compose?)

In treating writing realistically we will teach not just models of perfected prose but the entire composing process--all the way stations writers pass on the long road to their final drafts. We will show them means of discovering ideas, of shaping them, editing, revising and revising again, then finally proofreading their polished end product.

As much as possible we need to make the writing that takes place in our courses the equivalent of the writing we do ourselves. As we do when we write, our students need to write for a purpose and to an audience. You and I don't set out to write comparison and contrast papers, but we may write to convince our brother-in-law to invest in real estate rather than in municipal bonds. We don't ask our department heads to assign our manuscripts a letter grade; we do ask colleagues to edit our work and to offer suggestions for revision.

We can make our classroom writing projects realistic and engaging by discovering externally motivated occasions for student writing, or we can simulate these occasions by inventing fictional situations which call for a written response. An imaginary story in which a student has been cheated by an unscrupulous merchant may inspire letters of grievance far more effective in teaching argumentation than an unmotivated general assignment, and it can teach valuable lessons about audience and tone as well.

Even though grades, like the poor, may always be with us, we can find ways to lessen the anxieties they cause. My own solution is not to grade individual essays. I don't find grades helpful, because of the way students respond to them. They recognize that the intent of grades is to rate them, not to provide constructive information. This evaluative purpose is so ubiquitous that grades

contaminate every other comment we write on a paper. Every commentary we offer on style, each suggestion we make for revision is read by the student not as helpful advice but as a justification for the grade.

I try to respond to student papers just as I would to colleagues who ask for editing suggestions on their papers and articles. I write the most helpful and honest responses I can offer; I make suggestions for revision; I explain problems where needed. But I do not grade. At semester's end, each of my students submits a portfolio of her work and only then do I review it and assign it a grade. Because some students are uncomfortable without any grades during the semester, I allow them to request sample grades on papers whenever they choose, but I am constantly amazed at how rarely they do so. Most seem as content not to receive grades as I am delighted not to give them. And their progress seems better now than before. I must stress that by not grading I do not mean that I record grades which I keep secret from students. On the contrary, I find grading an entirely different mental operation from editing and one I do not even consider as I mark students' papers.

Whether or not we choose to grade individual assignments, we most certainly should not grade writers' early drafts, where a stress upon error-avoidance and instantaneous perfection can interfere with the demanding process of inventing and shaping ideas. Some students cannot write even a sentence without pausing to consider its potential failings of spelling and punctuation. Their constant worry about mechanics distracts them from their subject, and as a result they cannot compose extended thoughts, much less coherent papers.

The appropriate use of mechanics is important, but we must teach students to use their editing skills in ways which don't hinder their composing or lead

to writer's block. One helpful and relatively stress-free means of discovering ideas and creating material for papers is free writing. As an invention technique before they begin to compose a paper, we can have students write down their thoughts rapidly for several minutes, stimulated by statements or questions which we propose to them. They should be told that free writing is intended to get them started and that it will never be corrected or graded. They should not worry or even think about correctness and organization as they free-write, instead writing down whatever thoughts enter their heads as they occur. The time to make corrections, they learn, comes at a later stage of composing, when they revise and edit. Some students, who have been paralyzed for years by writer's anxiety and who have written only haltingly and tortuously, find themselves doing their best work in free writing, and the papers that they go on to compose come easier and gain markedly in quality.

When students have the opportunity to revise their work, when a lasting evaluation is delayed until the final edited draft, not only is the writer's anxiety reduced, but our procedure duplicates the practice of professional writers, who devote great energy to revision. Moreover, when we regard our response to student writing as editing, rather than grading, it need not remain the exclusive province of teachers. Students who write for an audience of their peers can receive valuable advice from their classmates in small editing groups. We can have students take their papers through one or more revisions, finally submitting their final polished drafts to us for our approval. A result of these procedures is to allow students to develop confidence and the satisfaction of having produced a work of competent, effective prose. As a result, they may come to <u>like</u> writing, rather than hating and fearing it, as so many students and former students do now. Modelling our classroom procedures on the practices we ourselves engage in when

we write has the effect not only of lessening students' anxiety, but also of creating condition where real progress in their development as writers can take place.